

Library programs aid education in Nepal

BY BRIAN JORDAN

In the fall of 1991, eight Nepalese porters arrived in the small village of Junbesi, situated at 9,000 feet in the Great Himalaya Mountain Range. Their journey had lasted several days as they trekked 900 books and a card catalog through Nepal and across the 11,800-foot Lamajura Pass.

Home to the Sherpa Cultural Center and the Tuptencholing Monastery, Junbesi also housed one of the first schools constructed by Sir Edmund Hillary during the 1960s following his successful climb up Mount Everest in 1953. Here, in the shadows of mountains and history, construction began on the Junbesi Community Library. Sponsored by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Rural Education and Development (READ), the Junbesi Community Library began circulating books in May 1992.

READ is one example of an international effort designed to raise Nepal's dismal literacy rate. Out of a population of 27 million people, less than half (42%) are considered literate, according to UNICEF. Even more disturbing than Nepal's low overall literacy rate is the disparate breakdown between men and women. The percentage of literate men (59%) is more than double that of women (24%). Not surprisingly, the country's unemployment rate and the percentage of people living below the poverty line are also both high.

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appointees, which leads some to question their competence and dedication to education.

Working in Nepal since 1991, READ has had to maneuver its efforts through a dangerous rebellion and political instability in order to reach the Nepalese people. Still, READ has been able to deliver much-needed educational resources. Since its first library project in Junbesi in

1991, READ has constructed 30 libraries across Nepal both in regions under Maoist control and in regions under government control. In addition, READ has supplied some 100,000 books.

The goal of the libraries, according to READ's founder and president Antonia Neubauer, is to encourage "independence not dependence." It is a goal that both factions have agreed on, thus allowing READ to be hailed both by the government and the Maoists. This approach has allowed READ to avoid the fate of some of Nepal's private schools.

More than just books

Each library that READ sponsors undergoes a careful vetting process before READ supplies seed funding and technical support. The village must first propose the library and have an area where it will be built. Each village must have in place a committee that is diverse in ethnicity and gender, a patron to oversee the committee's functioning, and most importantly, a sustaining project that will support the library after it has opened. Each library has a paid, trained librarian; a children's section; and several thousand books. The books are available in English and Nepali.

The libraries offer the villages more than just books. Many of the libraries have become de facto cultural centers where villagers can meet and conduct business. The libraries are especially beneficial to women who can pursue an education that would normally be reserved only for men. The library also offers women career opportunities.

The sustaining projects that each village is required to have in place generate enough money to manage the library while also providing a useful service. Some villages have installed telephone services, set up ambulance services, or established small storefront businesses.



Each READ library includes a children's section.

The strength of the program is its sustainability, said Neubauer. The community keeps the program ongoing and active from the income of the sustaining project. The income also funds different community groups, nongovernmental organizations, and interest groups.

Room to Read

Room to Read (RTR), an international NGO, has been operating in Nepal since 2000. Working throughout southeast Asia, RTR is involved in refurbishing schools and updating obsolete computer labs. In Nepal, RTR is engaged in a unique venture: publishing children's books in local languages. RTR began this experiment in 2003 and has since published 22 titles—six in 2003 and 16 in 2004. The books are written and illustrated by local authors and then published and placed in local libraries, such as the ones READ sponsors, and in schools.

RTR is also working to help young women in Nepal. RTR offers the Girls' Scholarship to girls who show potential and commitment but whose families do not have the money to support a full education. The success RTR has achieved was illustrated in a recent Young Writers Competition—all four top winners were girls.

Not all organizations have been as fortunate as READ or RTR. The Peace Corps, which had been in Nepal since 1962, has evacuated its volunteers because of safety concerns connected to the Maoist insurgency.

Because RTR relies on local Nepalese rather than Americans, the RTR workers do not have the same visibility problems that made the Peace Corps volunteers easily recognizable as foreigners. Furthermore, because of its international status unconnected to any single government, RTR is not targeted as a governmental organization.

While it is still early to see any impact on overall literacy rates in Nepal, the signs are encouraging. Through the efforts of groups such as READ and RTR, many Nepalese now have more of the resources necessary for a literate society. The girls who won the Young Writers Competition are just one example of the possibilities now available. Like climbing the Great Himalaya Mountain Range that rings Nepal, progress is gradual and slow, painful at times, but steady. ✪

Brian Jordan served as an intern for Reading Today during the fall of 2004.



Women often find the READ libraries especially beneficial.

A Maoist rebellion has wracked the tiny Hindu state since 1996, causing 8,000 deaths and wreaking havoc on the country's infrastructure, particularly its schools. Claiming to fight for a fairer and more just society, the Maoists have escalated their violence against schools in the past three years. After first requiring private schools in the Sandhikharka District of western Nepal to cut tuition by 20%, the Maoists later ordered all 17 private schools closed in the apparent belief that only the rich can afford to send their children to private schools. The Maoists have also conducted kidnapping campaigns aimed at students and teachers who are then indoctrinated along party lines.

Meanwhile, the government of Nepal has held back much-needed reforms and has been slow in providing key public services. There is no public library system in Nepal, nor are there plans to support one. Widespread public education was not available until the 1960s. Even today, the education most rural Nepalese children receive comes from schools that lack desks, books, trained teachers, and sometimes even walls. Moreover, the principals who administer Nepal's public schools are political

For further information

Contact information for the organizations mentioned in this article is provided below:

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Room to Read (RTR), The Presidio, PO Box 29127, San Francisco, CA 94129, USA. Telephone: 415-561-3331; website www.roomtoread.org.